

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY DJAKARTA

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 1128

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, UR, US, VN

SUBJECT: THE SOVIETS AND VIETNAM

1. TWO PRINCIPAL FACTORS DETERMINE THE SOVIET COMMITMENT TO A CLOSE POLITICAL AND MILITARY RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH VIETNAM. THE FIRST IS MOSCOW'S DESIRE TO INCREASE ITS INFLUENCE ALONG CHINA'S BORDERS. TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE HOSTILITY TO CHINA AND THE OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED THE USSR BY NORTH VIETNAM'S MILITARY NEEDS COMBINE TO MAKE HANOI A PROMISING INSTRUMENT FOR THIS SOVIET DESIGN. THE SECOND FACTOR IS THE IMPORTANCE OF NORTH VIETNAM TO MOSCOW'S EFFORTS TO CONSOLIDATE ITS HOLD OVER THE WORLD COMMUNIST MOVEMENT AND TO BURNISH ITS CREDENTIALS AS A STEADFAST BACKER OF REVOLUTIONARY FORCES. THIS FACTOR ALSO HAS A CHINESE ANGLE, SINCE NORTH VIETNAMESE TACIT SUPPORT WILL BE IMPORTANT IF THE USSR IS TO DIRECT AGAINST CHINA THE WORLD COMMUNIST CONFERENCE IT HOPES TO ORGANIZE.

2. IN THE INDOCHINA CONTEXT, THANKS TO THE PRESENCE OF
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POLISH AND HUNGARIAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS ON ICCS TEAMS

IN SOUTH VIETNAM, THE SOVIETS NOW HAVE A MUCH CLEARER PICTURE OF THE STRENGTH OF SAIGON THAN WAS THE CASE PREVIOUSLY. HOWEVER, THEY UNDOUBTEDLY FEEL THAT CONTINUED SUBSTANTIAL U.S. AID WILL BE NECESSARY FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE GVN IN ITS PRESENT FORM, AND THAT THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCH A CONTINUATION IS TENUOUS AT BEST. FOR THIS REASON AND BECAUSE OF OTHER FACTORS AS WELL, THE SOVIET UNION HAS PROBABLY CONCLUDED THAT HANOI'S EVENTUAL CONTROL OF SOUTH VIETNAM IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER IS INEVITABLE AND THAT HANOI IS LIKELY TO BECOME THE DOMINANT INFLUENCE IN CAMBODIA AND LAOS AS WELL. THIS OF COURSE REINFORCES SOVIET SUPPORT FOR NORTH VIETNAM--IT PAYS TO BACK A WINNER. MOREOVER, THE WEAKNESS OF THE SOVIET POSITION IN CAMBODIA--AND HANOI'S POTENTIAL STRENGTH THERE--MAKES MOSCOW EVEN MORE ANXIOUS TO TIE ITS FORTUNES TO HANOI'S. IN SUM, THE SOVIETS PROBABLY CONSIDER THEY HAVE A CLEAR INTEREST IN, AT THE VERY LEAST, APPEARING TO ASSIST HANOI'S ATTEMPT TO TAKE OVER SOUTH VIETNAM THROUGH GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS OF ECONOMIC AND MILITARY AID. JUDGING BY RECENT EVIDENCE, NORTH VIETNAM IS SATISFIED WITH SOVIET EFFORTS ON ITS BEHALF; INDEED MOSCOW'S STOCK IN HANOI CURRENTLY SEEMS TO BE VERY HIGH VIS-VIS CHINA'.

3. BUT THE SOVIETS MUST ALSO CONSIDER THE EFFECT INDO-CHINESE FACTORS CAN HAVE ON THEIR PARAMOUNT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES. THE REMOVAL OF VIETNAM FROM THE ZONE OF U.S.-SOVIET CONTENTION WAS AN IMPORTANT CONDITION FOR THE PROCESS OF CONSOLIDATING U.S.-SOVIET DETENTE, WHICH REMAINS A PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY. THE U.S. FACTOR THUS CONTINUES TO EXERCISE A RESTRAINING INFLUENCE ON MOSCOW'S RELATIONS WITH HANOI. WHILE THE SOVIETS WANT TO HELP NORTH VIETNAM SECURE ITS OBJECTIVES, THEY WOULD NOT WANT THIS TO HAPPEN IN A WAY WHICH COMPLICATED THEIR RELATIONS WITH WASHINGTON. THIS DUALITY ARGUES FOR SOVIET ENCOURAGEMENT OF A GRADUAL, "CREEPING" TAKEOVER OF SOUTH VIETNAM BY HANOI--OPTIMALLY THROUGH THE POLITICAL PROCESS--RATHER THAN A 1972 STYLE BLITZKRIEG MILITARY OFFENSIVE WHICH HIGHLIGHTED NORTH VIETNAMESE DEPENDENCE ON SOVIET ARMOR AS WELL AS SOVIET FAILURE TO EXERT A RESTRAINING INFLUENCE ON HANOI.

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4. WE HAVE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE SOVIETS HAVE MADE THIS SORT OF THINKING KNOWN IN HANOI. CERTAINLY SOVIET PUBLIC PROPAGANDA EMPHASIZES THE VIRTUES OF PEACEFUL RECONSTRUCTION IN NORTH VIETNAM OVER MILITARY PREPARATIONS, AND WE WOULD GUESS THAT THE SOVIETS ARE SAYING THE SAME THING IN PRIVATE. MOREOVER, THE U.S. ADMINISTRATION'S DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING VIETNAM APPROPRIATIONS OUT OF CONGRESS ALLOWS

MOSCOW NOT ONLY TO DRAW A CONTRAST IN HANOI WITH SOVIET STEADFASTNESS IN ARMS SUPPLIES, BUT ALSO TO REINFORCE ITS ARGUMENT THAT THE VICTORY IS WON IF NORTH VIETNAM WILL ONLY BE PATIENT. MOSCOW MAY EVEN BE ARGUING THAT NORTH VIETNAM MAY WELL GET ITS DESIRED POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION AID FROM THE U.S. PROVIDED THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF A NORTH VIETNAMESE TAKEOVER ARE CONSISTENT WITH THE 1973 PARIS AGREEMENT. IN ANY CASE, ALTHOUGH OTHERS ARE IN A BETTER POSITION TO KNOW THAN WE ARE, OUR BEST GUESS IS THAT MOSCOW IS BY AND LARGE CURRENTLY GIVING HANOI THE ECONOMIC AND MILITARY AID THAT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE HAVE ASKED THEM FOR. CERTAINLY ALL OUTWARD INDICATORS ARE HARMONIOUS IN THIS REGARD.

5. WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW, OF COURSE, IS HOW HARD THE SOVIETS WOULD BE PREPARED TO LEAN ON NORTH VIETNAM IF IT DECIDED TO TRY TO GO FOR BROKE IN THE SOUTH. THERE IS SOME DANGER, WE BELIEVE, THAT THE SOVIETS MIGHT BE INCLINED TO UNDERESTIMATE THE U.S. REACTION TO AN ALL-OUT NORTH VIETNAMESE OFFENSIVE. THE SOVIETS CERTAINLY CALCULATE THAT THERE IS NO QUESTION OF A RE-ENGAGEMENT OF U.S. FORCES IN VIETNAM. THE DANGER IS THAT MOSCOW MIGHT CONCLUDE THAT A LARGE-SCALE NORTH VIETNAMESE OFFENSIVE WOULD HAVE NO IMPORTANT EFFECT ON U.S. PUBLIC AND CONGRESSIONAL ASSESSMENT OF SOVIET MOTIVES AND THUS ON U.S. WILLINGNESS TO PERSIST IN A POLICY OF DETENTE WITH THE SOVIET UNION. IT IS IMPORTANT, THEREFORE, THAT WE MAKE CLEAR TO THE SOVIETS THAT FLAGRANTLY AGGRESSIVE ACTIONS BY HANOI ARE SURE TO HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON THE DEGREE OF COMMITMENT THAT THE U.S. IS ABLE TO BRING TO BEAR ON ITS POLICY OF IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH THE USSR.
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